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Of rain, a river

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ryan D. Woldruff entitled "Of rain, a river." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ryan Dean Woldruff entitled "Of Rain, A River." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Michael Knight
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Margaret Lazarus Dean

Allen Wier

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges
Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Of Rain, A River

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ryan Dean Woldruff
May 2009

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Abstract

This section of *Of Rain, A River* was written, workshopped, revised, revised, reworkshopped, revised, revised, etc. while the author was a Master's candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This novel section introduces the fictional landscape of Dine, Missouri and Nemanya County, in Northwest Missouri. This section follows the characters of Wes, Jory and Bill Schmidt, Carson and Danny Sellers, and Xenia. "Of Place" is a short essay about the various places in, and of, fiction.

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I. “Of Place”

“Of Place”

With specific character details in mind, maybe a line of dialogue, possibly a plot element, many writers begin their stories. But, as Eudora Welty writes, “Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel’s progress.” It is here, in this discussion of *place in fiction* and *place of fiction* that I am interested in sitting and writing, for awhile.

Depending on where you look, place (along with time) is either a subcategory of setting, or a standalone term (that encompasses time). In any definition, place it is where we situate our readers physically and spatially within a fictional world. Through place we describe sensory details within the storyworld, and within place we build our metaphors and themes. As Eudora Welty writes, “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place,” (42) and place, as the life-element of a fictive setting, needs development somewhere at the beginning of what John Gardner defines as a “vivid and continuous dream.”

In *Art of Fiction*, Gardner writes:

We read a few words at the beginning of the book or the particular story, and suddenly we find ourselves seeing not words on a page but a train moving through Russia, an old Italian crying, or a farmhouse battered by rain. We read on—dream on—not passively but actively. . . . In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real: We sympathize, think, and judge. We act out, vicariously, the trials of characters and learn from the failures and successes of particular modes of action, particular attitudes, opinions, assertions, and beliefs exactly as we learn from life. (31)

Here, Gardner has identified a dreaming reader as engaged and actively responding (mentally, emotionally, and physically) to the fiction. Here, “Russia,” and “a farmhouse,” are his examples; and even though “train moving through” creates in our mind a semblance of character and action, it is “Russia” that *should* ground us in some type of physical and spatial essence of “Russia.” For me, Gardner’s “Russia” is snow-covered Siberia, mountains and conifers, puffs of breath crystallizing on the train window—and there, for myself, I’ve created a Russia (probably from images in *Rocky IV*). Your Russia is probably different, maybe more abstract, maybe even the blob of a map, maybe Russia was a blob, as if you were going through the gray space inside a white t-shirt. What I’m saying is this: “Russia” may, in fact, be the most abstract word in the phrase. “Moving,” I would imagine, even in the abstract, is dreamable; it’s motion and even a blind man, having never seen “moving,” could feel motion and envision it. So, I believe Gardner

slides in the most important part of his call for the dream, not in the word “Russia,” nor the word “farmhouse,” nor even in the words “train moving through Russia,” but through “*a few words at the beginning. . . and suddenly we find ourselves*” (31, emphasis added).

Place, as the impetus for fiction’s dream, is what engages us as writers and readers. If we, as writers, do not negotiate the sights, sounds, and smells that our characters perceive as though they are real; or, if we fail to notice and recount the sensory information as important detail, we have possibly left out the most important part of the dream—we have left out the specific locus of the dream that fills, widens, and expands space within our reader’s dreaming of our fictive places. As we write our own places in our fictions, we understand that our characters speak to us from both real and fictive places—our characters, like us, are real within our places of fiction; they have navigable surroundings created to fit them, to test them, both for them and simultaneously with them. As Eudora Welty writes, “The moment the place in which the novel happens is accepted as true, through it will begin to glow, in a kind of recognizable glory, the feeling and thought that inhabited the novel in the author’s head and animated the whole of his work” (45). It is, according to Welty, through the glowing identification with places in fiction that the author and the reader, at entirely separate times, can share in a recognizable glory, share in the inhabited place, and the fictional dream of place. Our characters see, hear, smell, taste and touch with their fictive senses, within their fictive places, and so should our readers be able to vicariously see, hear, smell, taste, and touch along with our characters. To defy readers the specifics of place, is to starve their senses, shrink their dreams, take away that recognizable glory.

In most cases, place is initially stated bluntly through nouns, or specific proper nouns. For example: Martins Ferry, or Winesburg, Ohio. At this point, the reader may, or may not be imagining a specific sense of the proper nouns' signifying of "town" or "city," yet, it is even within these abstract nouns of "town" and "city" where we, as readers, imagine certain things can, or should, occur. It is the work of these place-nouns to carry certain identifiable, yet probably still abstract, notions of place—specifically, these nouns beckon to the reader that Martins Ferry, or Winesburg are initial place-ins for the characters that will eventually arise from within those two specific places. Then, for instance, if we place another noun, Autumn, in front of Martins Ferry, it is the word Autumn that begins to dream in colors, smells, sounds—it is the sensory information signified by the word "Autumn" that is most identifiable: even if we are not familiar with Martins Ferry, we might be able to *sense* an "Autumn," depending of course on our locus of reference. Then, as James Wright's poem, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" progresses, place is further defined "In the Shreve High football stadium" (15). Yet, this again is another fairly abstract place: having never been to Shreve High, I could say that I can't imagine what it looks like, but I am familiar with various types of football stadiums; so, I think I might be able to start dreaming it—again, place as an image is dependent upon the reader's locus of reference. Then, we see the characters of the narrator's fictive dream: "I think of Polack's nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,/ And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood, / And the ruptured night watchmen of Wheeling Steel, / Dreaming of heroes" (15). In the next stanza, after more character—"the proud fathers" and "their women"—we see place in fiction become a cause-effect motion: "*Therefore /*

Their sons grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October / And gallop terribly against each other's bodies" (15, emphasis added). Here, note the "Therefore" as a cause-effect movement outward from the sons, to the fathers and mothers, to the night watchmen and Negroes and Polack's, past the Shreve High football stadium, all out from Martins Ferry—but specifically, from the narrator's vision of "Martins Ferry" as a place. Here, the sons' growth, their gallop, their actions that occur within the place, are both affected and effected by place, both a sum and derivative input into place.

Likewise, if we look to another town in Ohio, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, we see that place, again is the impetus for the development of story, character, and plot. *Winesburg, Ohio* begins with a frame-like prologue, "The Book of the Grotesque," but as Anderson stated in a letter that Cowley cites, the first written portion of the book was, in fact, "Hands," the first full chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio*. It begins:

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. (27)

Here, unlike many other sections of *Winesburg, Ohio* that begin with character details, we see Anderson grounding the reader, first, in place: we are given "the half decayed veranda. . . a small frame house. . . the edge of a ravine. . . the town of Winesburg, Ohio," all as input into our dream Winesburg—what Winesburg is, what it does, what it feels

like on a sensory level. Here, we see all of this before we are introduced to any characterization, and then Wing Biddlebaum. A “fat little old man” that walks “nervously.” Yet, as Anderson continues, he again turns to place: “the long field. . . seeded for clover. . . a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds. . . the public highway. . . [and] berry pickers.” Thus, as Anderson moves forward, widening and grounding the sense of place, the sensories of *Winesburg, Ohio*, the reader accepts that sensory information, sees it, feels it, dreams it, understands the characters through it, and returns to those now-set images throughout the rest of the story as a continuation and expansion of place.

For writers, as we continually trudge through the writing process, place is from where our characters take initial shape, morphing through each draft, pulling, pushing, interacting with the sensory information from each place and all the other characters that also are pulled from those imagined places. Place, as Eudora Welty writes, “has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it.” Our characters, as Welty states, are confined by our places, and through that confining, they not only define themselves, but also work to define the fictive place through their own words and actions. One need look no farther than Genesis to see an example of God, as writer, creating character and then allowing the character to define and name the place. Evidence of this place-first creation cycle also occurs in many canonical works, including a very literal manifestation in William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, within the novel *As I Lay Dying*: “Jewel and I come up from the field, following the path in single file” (3). Kent Haruf’s Holt County in *Plainson* is one of the fictive places that I often turn:

“Here was this man Tom Guthrie in Holt standing at the back window in the kitchen of his house smoking cigarettes and looking out over the back lot where the sun was just coming up” (3). Also, Tom Drury’s Grouse County in *The End of Vandalism*: “One fall they held the blood drive in the fire barn at Grafton” (3). As these novels progress, the places animated by the authors become both as absolutely fictive and as absolutely real as the characters that inhabit them. Here, each county as a place-conduit of character seems to conjure the fiction through and within the specific details that describe place, and through both the language of the characters and the language of the narration, and through the plot elements that arise from each specific place.

As for my own *places in fiction*, much is based on northwest Missouri. The novel section of *Of Rain, A River* began very literally in northwest Missouri, as I was walking on Kite Road, a gravel road a half-mile from my parents’ house. There, along the fence line at a curve in Kite Road is a thick hedge post buried deep in the ground, and on it swings a metal sign that reads Xenia, Missouri, apparently a town abandoned in the 1870’s. From what I’ve heard, a Civil War battle was fought there; but this too may be a fiction. Nevertheless, I looked up the word Xenia and began thinking about the word Xenia both as a character name and as the ancient Greek notion of hospitality toward travelers who could be gods in human form. In the first draft of the first twenty-three pages, the character of Xenia was the main focus—an almost fantastical creature conjured from the rain. Initially, I had multiple character ideas for Xenia: she as an element of the rain, as a nymph of sorts, as a conjured being from the minds of Wes and

Jory, as a god-like creature that possessed a dead woman's body. Later, and still, I am working to rid myself of some of these initial thematic characterizations because they are not of place (there may very well be a place for a god-like creature possessing a dead woman's body, but it is not in this Dine, Missouri). Whereas Wes, Jory, Bill, Danny, Carson, Bernie, and Michelle are people that animated as inhabitants of Dine, Xenia's character was not. So, I think it quite fitting that her character, above all, has been the most difficult for me. At points in writing, I have considered dropping her character altogether and either leaving that space void for Wes and Jory to fill, or having her in the story without a point-of-view moment. I've also considered starting anew with a character Wes and Jory are familiar with: a neighbor woman, a friend of Michelle's, or a traveling local. But, as the story progresses through drafts she continues to animate herself within Dine, but with the perspective of an outsider—which is probably a better tension—if I can effectively navigate both places.

Place also helped define the characters of Wes, Jory, Bill, Carson, Danny, Bernie and the other locals within the story. The initial image of Wes (as he watches rain move over the land) was both an observant moment for his character, and an initial definition of the Midwest as a place of tumultuous weather, and quick shifts in temperament. He watches with confidence, while still aware of the “murmur” that is to come. Jory, very literally in the first scene, is knocking place (dirt) from the treads on his boots, while also trying to stall the work that accompanies living in a farm community. Carson's character was initially based upon Ken Rex McElroy, a man that is the subject of Harry MacLean's non-fiction book *In Broad Daylight*. McElroy bullied the residents of Skidmore, Missouri

until one man (never formally identified by the community) finally shot him, as the title suggests, in broad daylight. Yet, as Carson's character took shape, I felt the malevolence present in MacLean's account of Ken Rex McElroy was too much for Carson Sellers. Initially, Carson may not seem sympathetic, but as the story progresses, I am working to shift the reader's considerations of Carson's character.

Finally, many of the tensions that arise in this novel section stem from the memories and stories that drift, and have drifted, through my experience of Nodaway County, Missouri. As a young boy, my father brought a calf in the house and gave it a bed in the basement to keep it from dying. As a teenager, my brother and I would spend rainy summer days cleaning the garage. My father cooked "Hamburger Surprise." We had, for a short while, a worm farm in an old refrigerator. Also, rising rivers are common during the Spring and Summer months and almost every small town within a sixty-mile radius has at least one diner or bar that acts as a social gathering spot. In Nodaway County, there are thieves that take from open barns, or hook up to trailers that aren't their own. These things happen in this place of my memory and imagination, and so they happen in my fiction.

As for my own *places of fiction*, most places take shape in my office where books are slanted, propped, cornered, and stacked on and around my desk. And here, in the middle of one book pile (Carver, McCarthy, Haruf, Drury, all within reaching distance as I write), sits this laptop, and from the laptop stands this screen that mirrors the slight taps of my fingers to the keys. And here, my fingers follow commands from subtle twitches in my forearms, tapping, acting as conduits from a language-processing place in my brain

that is probably (somewhere) a proper noun. And here, if I look up, which I often do, I have a taped-together paper wall of words printed from a concordance of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian: Or, the Evening Redness in the West*; on it, letters in a small Arial font make up McCarthy's sense of place, some words are highlighted in various shades of yellow—*rimed*, *loam*, *ferrylanding*, *barrows*—some words I highlighted six months ago, some a week ago, and the highlighter marks call attention to a few words, while still tracking my progress through others. Above all, here I am, surrounded by the words of others, surrounded by their stories, their imaginations, their sense of “place.” This place is where I work to create my own places of fiction. From the earth of this place, my place, characters are still animating, continually being molded, reworked, still unfinished. Here, in this place, in their place, is where I have been working on them, letting them take shape as they will, within Nemanya County, in and around the small town of Dine.

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II. Of Rain, A River

Of Rain, A River

Wes Schmidt

There along county road HH, five miles south of Dine, Missouri, Wes Schmidt leaned against his garage door's metal track and crossed his arms. He was a tall man with a Carter Feed cap slightly cocked, the grease-stained bill still as flat as the day Jerry Carter handed it to him. Shoots of thick black hair curled up around his ears and the back of his cap. Above him, clouds the color of wet concrete and following behind the clouds a wall of pale-blue rain slanted across the horizon, swelling and pushing. For a moment, Wes felt the murmur of oncoming wind, and then the front was there blowing hard from west to east, bending the birches and evergreens that lined the fence along the south side of his house. Rain fell in straight heavy lines. Wes stood watching. He heard Jory's light footsteps and then felt his son's presence standing quietly behind him.

For most of the afternoon, he and Jory had cleaned their garage. Jory had pounded their boots against the cement garage floor, knocking dirt clods from the treads, sweeping the clods into a pile and pushing the pile onto the driveway pad. Now, as clods dissolved a a clay-brown shimmer down the driveway.

When Wes finally turned, Jory was sitting in the middle of the garage floor, pulling duct tape in a tight and precise downward spiral around a wooden broom-handle. Wes coughed lightly, and then cleared his throat. He picked a greased rag from the workbench, balled it up, and pitched it hard over Jory, toward the trashcan. The rag lifted a few hairs on Jory's head as it passed over, landing short of the trashcan, on top of a pair of leather boots that were now too small for Jory. Jory squinted in concentration, ignoring Wes. His hair had grown long and even darker.

"You're stalling," Wes said.

"It cracked."

Jory had turned twelve in February. His voice had always been whispery, raw, as if words, forced up from his lungs, scraped over dry vocal chords. As June approached, Wes thought Jory's voice seemed broader, wider, even louder when he spoke, a clearer tone.

"I was pushing down on it too hard and it cracked right here," Jory said, holding the base of the handle.

"More like stalling."

"Whatever," Jory said.

Wes leaned back against the metal track, scratching his back against the hard edge. The track was cool, sharp.

"You want Hamburger Surprise?"

"No." Jory stood and leaned into the broom handle, pushing his weight into it. The handle buckled again. "Shit," Jory said, dropping the handle to the floor.

“It’s that, or nothing. Only hamburger in the freezer. No buns.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever,” Wes mumbled. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, feeling a headache pulse and spin like a bolt through the right side of his brain. He heard his son shuffle up beside him, and even with his eyes closed, he could feel him there, standing cross-armed as well, watching the rain.

“Dad,” Jory said. “There’s a woman.”

When Wes opened his eyes, there at bottom of the driveway a woman walked from behind one of the evergreens and bent at the waist, hands on her knees, hair a mess of wet falling past her elbows.

“I see.” For a brief moment, Wes wondered if, in fact, he did see her.

“Dad,” Jory repeated, nudging his father’s arm.

“What’d I just say?” Wes moved now, lifting a maroon flannel from a hook on the wall.

Her dark hair matted to her face and the back of her neck. She wore a blue dress with white flower patterns. In one hand, she held a small black duffel bag. Between the fingers of her other hand she clenched two white-heeled sandals. On one sandal, the sandal strap hung loosely, broken. Wes covered her shoulders with the maroon flannel. She took it and lifted the flannel above her head, shielding herself from the rain.

“You all right?” Wes asked.

“My car broke down a few miles that way,” she said, nodding east.

“Want me to carry you?” Wes asked, pointing at her bare feet. For the first time, she seemed to acknowledge Wes, and then Jory. Wes noticed a slight pause in her heavy breathing, as she glanced at each of them.

“I’ll be fine,” she said.

Jory lead them back up the driveway. Wes followed at the rear. In front of him, identical tattooed ivy patterns crawled up the back of her calves, up from her small muddy heels.

Wes introduced himself and picked the broken broom handle from the garage floor, kicking the broom-head toward the trashcan. His t-shirt now hung heavy along his chest and thick shoulders, the neckline was soaked through and stretched, drooping below his collarbone.

“Xenia,” she said, sitting her duffel bag and sandals on the workbench. Then, she swept her hair to one side, wringing it to the garage floor. Wes noticed another tattoo on the inside of her arm, an ivy pattern that matched the tattoos on her calves. She stood in front of him, the flannel wet, hanging almost to her knees, dripping.

“You need a change of clothes?” Wes asked.

“I’ll dry,” she said, sliding one arm out of the flannel and then the other, her hands folding the flannel into a small square with one quick motion. She held the flannel out, toward Wes. For a moment, her dress fused with her skin and Wes watched her exhale, the thin blue fabric of her dress stretched between her bra cup and the gooseflesh skin of her breast. Wes glanced at his son as he took the flannel. Jory stood with his

hands in his pockets, his head tilted slightly, examining her, his hair wet and shining under the fluorescent garage light.

“The rain’s not going to wash your car away is it?” Jory asked.

“What?” She crossed her arms tightly in front of her, covering her breasts.

Wes cleared his throat. “The rain. It won’t wash your car away.”

“Oh, no. I’m kind of parked half-way up a hill. My car stalled and I tried to start it back up, but it wouldn’t go. Then I decided to get out and start walking and that was a bad idea. I didn’t plan on getting caught in a monsoon.”

“You want to go have a look at it now?”

“Oh, no. As long as you don’t mind, I’d like to just stand here for a bit. If that’s okay.”

“You need a phone?”

“Maybe.”

“Well,” Wes said. “Okay.” He unfolded the flannel and hung it on a hook.

“Are you hungry?” Jory asked. “We were about ready to start dinner.”

“I just need to sit for awhile.”

Wes squatted underneath the workbench, pulling out his space-heater. He plugged it in and shifted, turning back to Xenia and his son. Xenia stood at the edge of the garage and Jory behind her, his head tilted and still.

“Jory,” Wes said.

“I’m not staring,” Jory mouthed.

“Go. Peel some potatoes.” Wes pointed toward the kitchen door, and then flipped the heater switch. The heater kicked on, humming loudly, knocking at first, and then blowing stale metallic air and cobwebs out from the metal face. Wes plucked the cobwebs and wiped over it with his hand.

“Do you want a potato?” Jory asked.

“No thank you,” she said, still looking out at the rain.

Wes stood and pointed again toward the kitchen door. “Go,” he said. “Now.” He felt the push of hot air through his jeans. The heater buzzed. Something inside knocked around. Satisfied, he nudged it with his foot.

“Here,” he said. “If you want to dry.” She turned to face him and bent down, unzipping her duffel bag, pulling a brown hairbrush from the bag. Wes nodded briefly. Then, looking past her, on the road, a truck drove by. Wes walked to the front of the garage as the truck’s brake lights blinked heading down the hill, west. He watched the truck crest the next hill, then turned, nodding to Xenia as he slid his boots off and carried them inside.

“Is she still out there?” Jory stood peeling potatoes over the sink.

“You can just leave her alone. We don’t know this lady. She might be a drug addict or something.”

“She doesn’t look druggy.”

“Still,” Wes said. He pulled a pound of hamburger from the freezer and placed it in the microwave. “She looks to want to be alone, so we’ll leave her alone.”

“Dad,” Jory said. “Are you going to get her some clothes?”

“I’d rather not dig them out.”

“I’ve got sweat pants that’ll probably fit.”

Wes shrugged. He leaned onto the counter beside his son. Jory stared at him with the peeler one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other.

“Well,” Jory said.

“I guess, sure. Whatever you think might fit.” Wes tossed his hat to the floor, toward his boots. “And take your socks off.”

Jory returned barefoot with a pair of black sweatpants and a worn-out camouflage t-shirt. Wes folded the sweatpants and stacked the t-shirt on top. Then, he quietly pulled the kitchen door open and there sat Xenia, cross-legged on the maroon flannel coat in front of the space heater, brushing her hair to the side of her naked back. It shimmered something between auburn and amber under the garage light and it seemed to Wes that her hair fell slowly after she pulled the brush through. He noticed the slight impression of her spine, sliding down to where it met the line of her underwear. He slipped the door shut.

“Was she naked?” whispered Jory.

“Wash up, get ready for dinner.”

“She looked naked.”

“I said wash up.” Wes stood by the door holding the sweatpants and shirt as his son walked down the hall toward the bathroom.

The dress was warm and still damp, especially along the seams, but Xenia slid it back on. She squatted in front of the space heater again, briefly.

“Rhiannon.” She hummed her daughter’s name into the space heater as she pulled the brush through her hair over and over again. Her pitch matched the space-heater’s electric buzz and she kept her mouth open wide, letting the heat fill it. Even her teeth were cold.

She pulled the cord from the wall and wrapped it around the handle, scooting the space heater back underneath the bench. She picked the maroon flannel from the ground, turning to place it back on the same hook she had lifted it from, and there, on the step below the door, a pair of black sweat pants and a camouflage shirt folded neatly on top.

Carson Sellers

Carson Sellers kept his blonde hair cropped short, close to his scalp, and he had a habit of rubbing a thick scar above his hairline. Over the past hour, as he sat in a booth at Bernie's, he picked cold fries from his basket, sipped his sweet tea, and occasionally rubbed the scar into his skull, nudging it around, feeling the sinewy tissue shift under his fingertip. Behind Carson and to his right, Davy Bennett had spent the hour telling Russ Geshwinder that he had two grandsons coming in from Des Moines for the weekend, they're slackers Davy had said, lazy, but Brenda cooks nice for them, they look like Tom, both of them. Russ, Carson found out, was heading to Corning for a cattle auction after he finished his hot beef and mashed potatoes, hoping to find a few angus feeder calves for cheap. Russ and Davy both lived on CC, toward Quinn.

Lifting his cup to his mouth, Carson felt a push against his back as Jack Morrison's nasally voice slid into the booth behind him. Carson hit the lip of the cup on his teeth and tea dribbled down his chin. He sat the cup on the table, wiped his forearm across his chin, and brushed the front of his shirt. Then, he slammed one elbow into the

back of the seat to get Jack's attention, which it seemed he did because Jack's voice stopped mid-sentence, and then began again. Carson turned in the booth, propping a leg up on the seat, an arm on the back of the seat, his fingers tapping the board behind Jack's head. He watched rain pour over the leaf-blocked gutters. And while Carson had never seen a waterfall up close, Carson thought this view of the water coming over the gutter must be like watching a waterfall from inside a cave. Although, he figured, a real cave was probably dark on the inside and probably smelled some kind of musty, not like bleach and french fries. Then, for a moment, the voices stopped altogether as the lights flickered and a clap of thunder popped overhead and Carson immediately wished the lights would have gone out, just for a few moments, to see what his cave looked like.

He rubbed his palm over the backboard and sat up, looking directly into the booth behind him. There, the county Veterinarian, Eddie Burke sat across from Jack. Eddie nodded at Carson. Carson returned the nod and stared at Eddie until Eddie turned his head and removed his cowboy hat. Then, Carson relaxed again, leaning his head back against the board. Eventually, they talked: A cow pissing on a flat rock, what that is. You get that hay in? Yeah. Put most of it up yesterday afternoon, the east barn over on CC, two-hundred fifty something bales I think we ended up with. A few this morning got a little wet, not many, maybe forty. Good deal.

Bernie Halls, the owner, wiped over a table to Carson's right. Carson watched the fat man bend over the table, his stomach resting on it, tipping the table slightly as he jerked a black towel back and forth over the brown tabletop. Bernie stood, wiping his forehead and then turned to face Carson, picking the tea pitcher from a seat beside him.

Carson jiggled his cup.

“Need a refill?” Bernie asked.

“Yesterday,” Carson said.

“You’ll think yesterday,” Bernie said, shuffling toward Carson. “When I throw you outside and whip your ass in front of all these kind gentlemen.”

Carson smiled. “You want a tip, fat-ass?”

“Five, maybe six years’ worth would be nice.” Bernie filled Carson’s cup until it ran over, then wiped the table around the cup.

“I’ll get right on that,” Carson said.

“I bet,” Bernie said, turning, filling Jack Morrison’s cup. “Jack, you seen any of the Schmidts today? I heard their East Forty got hit pretty hard, wind and everything. They still rent that off Dell Carmichael?”

“Wes bought it, I think, sometime here lately, but I can’t say for sure if he did or didn’t,” Jack said. “But, yeah, about a hundred acres or so there along the bottom, that hill that runs up over my place and all of Carmichael’s got hit pretty hard. They had a few cattle out along the road there before I left. I called Bill and he said he was going to go check it out.”

Carson listened, sipping his tea. Today, unlike the past few Saturdays, there had been no mention of Michelle Schmidt. Nobody asked Bernie any questions about her, as if Bernie might know the answers, or told Bernie they too missed having her around. He had even heard Tom Bennett say the food tasted better when she was around, to which Bernie had said “Well, nothing’s changed except the one delivering it and I’m not much

to look at.” Tom agreed. And although Carson was glad he did not hear her name, something about not hearing her name, that word, Michelle, bothered him. Other people saying her name evoked different images of her, images he could not conjure on his own.

“Charge it,” he said, standing. He squeezed hard the fat on the back of Bernie’s arm and then pulled a nickel from his pocket, flipping it into the basket.

Wes Schmidt

Wes leaned over the sink. Rain pinged on the window glass, streaking horizontal lines. Below him, dishes spread across the counter, bowls with milk and flecks of cereal hardened at the bottom, forks with black knots of food dried to the tongs, a glass casserole dish specked with gray and white mold. Wes picked a plate from the stack and held it out in front of him by the fork that stuck to it like the rung of a shield. Then, he popped the fork from the plate and picked a loose crust of white from the plate with his fingernail.

To his right, a laundry basket sat on the linoleum floor next to the counter. Bill Schmidt, Wes' father, had filled the basket with plastic silverware and paper plates at the Wal-Mart in Waltersville over two months ago now and left it there. In the basket, two boxes of silverware and a few stacks of paper plates were still unopened. Wes reached down and picked a stray paper plate from a pile, then dropped it back in.

He pulled from the cupboards three dusty white ceramic plates with leaf patterns around the edges, dusting off each plate with a washrag. He set the plates and silverware

on the table. Then, he opened the oven and lifted out the tinfoil-wrapped hamburger, peppers and potatoes, setting them on the table, parting the foil slightly, watching steam rise from the opening.

“You going to do the dishes?” Jory stood beside the table, a hand on his chair. He had tucked a clean white t-shirt into a pair of dark blue jeans. The jeans fit around the waist, but looked to be about six inches too short. His hair was wet and combed, parted, and curling at the ends. “Are you?” His eyes were wide and demanding, his mouth still shaped with the last syllable, as if the question held there was significant. Wes decided it was.

“I guess. Why?”

“Well I’m definitely not.” Jory sat and pulled open the tinfoil. He picked around, separating the hamburger from the peppers, and the peppers from the potatoes. “Is she still naked?”

“Enough,” Wes said, pulling a bottle of ketchup from the refrigerator.

At the kitchen door, Wes knocked loudly from inside and opened the door slowly. Xenia stood beside the workbench, her hair longer than he had first imagined, falling past her shoulders to the middle of her back. She had changed into the sweat pants and camouflage shirt. Wes decided the sweatpants fit her better than Jory. Behind her, the space heater was tucked again under the bench, the cord wrapped neatly around the handle.

“A baked potato in here for you,” Wes said. “From our garden.”

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Don’t have to eat it, I guess,” he continued, standing with the door open.

“Thought you might be hungry.”

“I guess,” she said. She smiled slightly, sliding her duffel bag under her arm. “I guess I am.”

“You look dry,” Jory said, as she entered the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Xenia said, sitting as Wes pushed in her chair.

For a time, they all ate, silent, silverware clicking and scraping on plates. The ceiling fan hummed overhead. When she was finished, she pushed the plate toward the middle of the table and sat back in her chair. Wes and Jory exchanged glances and kept eating.

“I’ll leave as soon as the storm stops,” she said, finally.

“Well, it’s supposed to storm all day. Even tonight,” Jory said. “And besides, where are you going to go?”

Her hair fell softly in front of her face and she parted it, pulling it back. “Is it just the two of you?” she asked.

“My wife Michelle died in February,” Wes said.

“Someone ran her off into the river,” Jory said, quickly.

“That’s never been proven,” Wes said, looking at his son. “We don’t know that.”

“Not for a fact,” Jory said, shrugging. “But, still.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Wes and Jory nodded simultaneously.

After a few minutes, she stood, picking up her plate.

“I’ll get that,” Wes said, leaning back in his chair, forcing a smile. “You don’t want to go over there. The sink is a little dirty.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

Jory followed her to the counter with his plate. She stood, looking over the counter, and then quickly placed her plate on the stove.

“It’s really dirty,” Jory said. He pulled in a deep breath through his nose. “It kind of stinks even.”

“That’s enough,” Wes said.

Later, Wes sat at the table, listening for any conversation between Xenia and his son that might whisper in through the thin wall connecting the kitchen and garage. The two had walked out together, Jory explaining in a matter-of-fact voice that this was a ripe time to pick up nightcrawlers for his worm farm—a small dirt-filled refrigerator that Wes kept in the basement.

Wes gathered the plates, stacking the other two plates on top of his own and then the silverware, piling it all in one white and silver heap. He carried the plates to the sink and sat them on top of the moldy glass casserole dish. Then, he lightly kicked the laundry basket, picked it up, and emptied the paper plates and plastic silverware into a black trash-bag, sliding the trash bag under the sink. He placed all the dirty plates and dishes on top of each other in the basket, stacking them carefully. When he was finished, he emptied a half-bottle of liquid dish-soap into the sink, ran the faucet, and wiped down the counter.

The basket was heavier than he imagined it would be and he stepped carefully as he carried the laundry basket full of dishes downstairs. He slid the basket next to Jory's worm farm refrigerator. There, he covered the basket with a pair of Jory's jeans and a faded navy blue beach towel.

Carson Sellers

Carson Sellers pulled a beer from the cooler in the back of his red Dodge, sliding it down into his cup holder, setting it upon loose change, a blue pen and a worn condom wrapper. He spun his tires over the wet gravel in Bernie's parking lot, fishtailing to the right, then the left, until his truck found solid earth and gravel to catch against. He downshifted onto the asphalt, chunks of mud slapping up against the carriage of his truck and back down against the black road. He drove his loop east around Dine, along county road CC, past Vet Burke's mule barn and past the few standing houses that gave the population sign at Quinn double digits. He sped through the stop sign in the middle of a four way intersection two miles south of Quinn and then turned west onto county road HH, slowing as he passed a white Dodge Omni along the side of the road. It had Pennsylvania license plates and Carson drove slowly for a mile, considering. Then, he leaned into both dips around the sharp S curve as it approached a bunny hill where Wes Schmidt's place sat twenty yards from the road, up a gravel driveway. He slowed as he drove past. The garage door was open. He kept driving.

He turned south on Katydid Road, following its gravel and mud, looking for any sign of floods along the river-bottom. The river was out over Tenning and Newstead's bottom ground, the standing water holding the reflection of clouds, the breeze and rain pulling a set of pocked ripples over and across the water. He stopped before the bridge and sat with the truck running idle, the engine knocking. He finished his beer and pulled another from the cooler. The rain came down, spilling over the brim of his cap, down the back of his neck, down his spine and down into the band of his boxers. He opened the can and let the cold fall down his throat and sink through his chest, into his lungs and heart and the middle of his back. Then he squatted in the road and listened for anything—another vehicle, a bleating animal, the call of a bird. Only the rain. He decided there was nothing here that still lived. Standing, he tossed the can into the truck bed and grabbed another from the cooler. He slipped the third can between his legs as he backed down the road, his neck craned, looking over his shoulder. He backed into a narrow gateway and straightened his wheels. For a moment, with the windows down and his engine still knocking, he watched for any movement in the trees or across the flooded field—the rain, the standing water, the trees, the low clouds, all of it gray.

“Jesus,” he said, slipping his hat from his head. He ran his hand through his wet hair, feeling the wet squeeze from his hair and slip down the back of his neck. Sitting a moment longer, he pulled a long drink on his beer, and then pushed in on the clutch, sliding the gearshift down into second gear. He pulled onto the road and turned north, downshifting again, fence posts marking the cadence of his speed, blurring as he approached the bridge. He downshifted again. The low buzz of the tires against the gravel

turned to a high whine as the tires gripped and echoed along the concrete bridge floor. He let the sound drone in his ears and slid to a stop on the other side of the bridge. He stepped out of his truck and leaned his elbows on the truck-bed, looking down the embankment. He finished his beer and pulled another from his cooler. He leaned against his truck, holding the can at his side with two fingers, knocking it against the fender-well. There he stood, watching, as the frothing brown river towed branches and refuse underneath the bridge.

Bill Schmidt

Bill Schmidt honked and slammed on his brakes, swerving, sliding over the wet blacktop as Carson Seller's Dodge fishtailed onto HH from Katydid Road.

"Goddammit," Bill yelled, his body now fully awake and pulsing. He slipped his truck into neutral while setting the emergency brake. He stepped down from the cab and into the rain, watching Carson's passenger side tires dig a fifty-yard rut along the shoulder of the blacktop. He stood, hands on his hips, calming himself through a series of deep breaths as Carson's Dodge tossed mud high in the air and sped down the middle of the blacktop. He walked to the front of his new Chevy truck, looking it over.

"Goddamn," Bill muttered, bending over. On the chrome his bumper was a red streak of paint. Bill wiped his hand across it and part of the line disappeared.

As he turned into his son's driveway he avoided the deep channels along the east side, driving half in the grass. He put his truck in park and turned off the wipers, sitting with the engine running. Through the drops on his windshield, he watched the figure of his grandson dart out of the open garage door, picking something from the driveway pad,

then darting back in the garage. Then, again. Bill flashed his headlights twice and Jory sprinted out again, and quickly back in. Bill sat forward and turned on his wipers.

“Well,” he said, as a woman in a camouflage shirt walked to the front of the garage. She was petite, maybe a head taller than Jory and Bill could see her long dark hair from where he sat. “Well,” he repeated, turning off his engine. He honked lightly and stepped out of his truck.

“Dad’s inside,” Jory yelled.

“Get him,” Bill yelled back, jogging to the garage. He stopped at the edge of the garage and turned, stomping his boots against the lip of the garage. The woman stood beside a lawn chair. She held a blue plastic cup lightly in one hand. Bill smiled.

“I’ll have what you’re having,” he said.

The woman smiled. “I don’t know,” she said, extending the cup. Inside, a dozen or so nightcrawlers wriggled at the bottom.

“Tequila,” Bill said.

“I wish,” she said, smiling, offering her free hand. “I’m Xenia”

“Xenia. I think I can handle that,” he said. “Bill Schmidt. Nice to meet you.” Her hand was small and cold. He held it for a second, then nodded, smiling. He rubbed his own hands together, feeling the gristly knots and swelled knuckles, and then slipped them into his pockets.

“So,” Bill said, “they fought over you yet?”

She laughed what Bill considered both a true and courteous laugh, short and bright, like the wind-chimes on his back porch. He decided then that Xenia held a sweet

smile and a matching laugh, and those two features had always been more striking to Bill than anything else a woman could have.

“No fights,” she shrugged, smiling. “Not yet anyway.”

“Well,” Bill said, “I can probably take out Wes’ knees before he knows what hit him, and Jory doesn’t stand a chance. I’ll pull his shirt over his head.”

Xenia laughed again as Jory opened the door and hopped down the step, followed by Wes. Jory jogged to Xenia and took his cup.

“Xenia says you’re saving those for Tequila,” Bill said.

“No,” Jory said, holding them up in front of Bill. “Fishing,”

“Oh. Well,” Bill said, “If that’s what you’re calling it. Okay. I feel like fishing.”

Jory pulled a long nightcrawler from the glass and held it up in front of Xenia.

“How long do you think this one is?” Jory asked. “A foot?”

Bill turned to Wes, facing away from Jory and Xenia. He and Wes shared a look and Wes shook his head quickly.

“Her car’s broke down,” Wes said.

Bill turned and Xenia had crouched to examine the worms that Jory lined along the garage floor. He nodded and shrugged. “Well, we got cattle out over on the East Forty. Tree fell on the fence. Morrison called me about an hour ago now, I guess. Said he was heading into Bernie’s. Said he saw them as he pulled out of the driveway and decided he should call.”

“Nice of him,” Wes said, “He say where they were exactly?”

“A few out on the blacktop, a few were wandering north.”

“Jory,” Wes said sharply, stepping past Bill. “Grab some boots.”

“Why?” Jory slumped his shoulders and held the blue cup against his leg. The nightcrawler still dangled from his other hand.

“Cattle out, let’s go.” Wes clapped his hands once and walked to his workbench.

Bill stood with his arms crossed, observing Jory’s face as Jory picked up the nightcrawlers and dropped them back into the cup. Bill smiled, and then walked to the boot pile, picking Wes’ brown boots from the pile. Jory came up behind Bill and pulled his own pair, and then a pair of red galoshes. Bill stood, watching Jory drop the galoshes in front of Xenia. Xenia bent down and slipped them on.

“Jory, maybe she doesn’t want to go,” Bill said.

Xenia slipped her right foot into the boot. “I think they are a little big.” She looked at Jory and shrugged.

Jory reached down and felt for her toe. “They’ll do,” he said.

“You don’t have to go,” Wes said. “We can go have a look at your car if you want, or you are welcome to stay here.” Jory stood with his hands on his hips. She shrugged and looked down at her boots.

“I’ll go, I guess,” she said.

The truck cab was a tight squeeze and Bill could feel Jory’s hip hard against his own. Xenia sat in the middle, between Jory and Wes, holding her hands between her legs, looking straight ahead. On the road, the other three were quiet, awkward even, Bill thought. He leaned forward onto the steering wheel and glanced to his right. There, Xenia

cramped awkwardly between Jory and Wes. Her upper body twisted toward Jory, while her feet jaunted the opposite direction, toward Wes.

“Comfy?” Bill asked, smiling.

“No,” Jory said.

“Well you got the best seat in the house,” Bill said.

“Whatever,” Jory said.

Bill slapped his hand down on Jory’s leg, right above the kneecap. Jory jerked and his knee hit hard against the gearshift.

“See,” Jory said.

“Well,” Bill said. “You can sit back in the bed if you want.”

“No thanks.”

Bill considered telling Wes that he had almost hit Carson Sellers head on, but when he leaned forward, Wes was looking down at Xenia, his face close to her hair. Xenia slid her shoulder back, behind Wes’ shoulder and looked up at Wes. Wes nodded. Xenia nodded. Bill sat back, letting the moment settle for a few seconds. Then, he decided against mentioning Carson.

Bill lugged the chainsaw from the back of his truck and sat it on the ground.

“Piss elm,” he said.

“If we’re not back in a couple of hours, we stole your truck,” Wes said, backing onto the blacktop.

“Better not. That’s my retirement.” Bill lifted a steel fence post and his post driver from the truck bed. He took a few steps toward the gate and threw the fence post and the post driver toward a tangle of thick ditch grass by the downed limb. As they drove away, Bill watched the three silhouettes in the cab of his truck. He had seen the sight before, many times, but this time he had to take a breath to resettle himself. He picked the chainsaw from the wet grass and carried it to the dead limb, his opposite arm held straight out from his side for balance. A fibrous spike protruded out from the tree trunk where the branch had snapped. The downed branch had wedged itself up against the bulk of the tree.

The chainsaw billowed black smoke when it finally got started, and even though it was almost twenty years old, Bill was pleased with how well the chain cut through the elm. He sat the chainsaw in the grass and steadied his boot against a gnarl in the smallest chunk, pushing it, and again pushing it, watching its oblong roll as it picked up speed, bouncing and squishing down into the muddy crease of the ditch. He breathed heavy and walked back up the slight grade, squatting on the biggest chunk. There, he closed his eyes and plugged his ears as he listened to his heartbeat and breathing slow, steadily feeling the wet coming up from the heartwood, into the seat of his jeans. He stood wiping the back of his jeans and bent down, examining the rings in the wood. He considered counting them, but even then, it would not make him feel younger.

Carson Sellers

Carson Sellers was drunk when he passed the Schmidt's East Forty the first time. He saw the branch across the fence, the way the steel post bent horizontal, the barbed wire snapped and hanging limply from the line of fence posts. When he passed the cattle grazing along the road north of Morrison's he stuck his arm out the window and waved, then flipped them the middle finger. He knew they were the Schmidt's cattle, that Wes had originally rented the land from Dell Carmichael and recently, probably from Michelle's life insurance plan, had the money to buy it.

Two more beers later, he was hooking up his gooseneck trailer, jacking the trailer up off the wet four by four. He tossed it into the back of his truck. The trailer wobbled behind him. A wheel dropped off the side of the asphalt into the wet grass and he slowly pulled the trailer back onto the blacktop. As he came to the cattle again, they had moved further north of Morrison's place, approaching the bottom of a hill where a culvert was flooded with water. He pulled the truck in a circle, dropping off the gravel once, and then again, as he backed the trailer slowly up the gravel road.

Three cows and three calves huddled along the fence line, the calves against their mothers, pushing their heads up against their mothers' bellies. Carson watched them for a moment and then pulled his last beer from the cooler and opened it while walking toward the trailer gate. He opened it wide so that it blocked half of the road, and then he circled around and came up behind them, arms out wide.

"C'mon now," he said. An angus cow turned to him and bawled. "That's right, talk to me baby." He walked slowly toward them, with his arms wide, the cow trotted a few yards to his right.

"No, no," he said, walking to slowly cut her off. He poured the beer in a semi-circle in front of him and bent down, outlining the beer-line with his finger. "Can't cross this line," he said. He pointed down to the line of foam soaking slowly into the wet road. "Cannot. Absolutely no crossing this goddamn line." He walked toward her again and she backed slowly toward the trailer.

"Good girl, that's right," he said. He reached his hand out, putting it in front of him and the cow sniffed at it, then turned slowly and started jerking long grass from the edge of the ditch. Her jaws flexed and her eyelids closed and opened again, slowly, as she chewed. Carson took another drink, finishing the beer. He flipped the can to the ditch; the cow jerked and trotted a few steps down into the ditch.

"Damn it," Carson said. A calf stood two yards front of him, watching him. The calf was also angus black, its hair slick with wet. Carson walked slowly toward it. It tensed, cocking its head to one side.

“That’s right,” Carson said. He took a slow step toward the calf and put his hand out. The calf leaned and sniffed it, then opened its mouth and started sucking on Carson’s fingers. Carson felt the wet roughness of the calf’s tongue as it worked against his fingers, the smoothness of the calf’s gums.

“Beer,” Carson said, wiggling his fingers in the calf’s mouth. The calf frothed at the mouth and jerked on Carson’s fingers.

“Hey now.” Carson pulled his hand out. “Liking that way too much.” He stepped up beside the calf and picked it up, carrying it to the trailer. The cow behind him bawled and he could hear her hurried steps as she followed. She bawled again and Carson stepped up into the trailer with the calf. He carried the calf to the front of the trailer and sat it down, pulling a gate shut across the small front compartment, locking in the black calf. He opened the side of the trailer and stepped out, circling again around to the back. He came up behind the two cows—the angus cow had already stepped up and in. The calf bawled in the front of the trailer and Carson followed from a distance behind the other two cows, also coaxing them up and in. Another angus calf and one black-white faced calf also followed suit behind the two cows. Carson walked the trailer door shut and pulled the latch bar up and over the catch.

The night was coming on black. The clouds held stagnant overhead, shuffling slowly now toward the east, dropping a heavy mist over the hills. A lone charolais calf still stood in the middle of the blacktop. Carson walked slowly toward the calf with his hand out. Then, he heard a truck and turned as the truck come to a brief stop at the top of the hill. Headlights came on. Carson stepped toward the calf and in one motion caught

the calf around the neck and twisted the calf's tail up and around its back like he had seen his father do many years ago. He dropped his hand below the calf's hips, lifting the calf from the ground. The truck accelerated down the hill and he looked over his shoulder as it slid to a stop a dozen yards from where he held the calf in his arms.

Carson knew Bill Schmidt had bought a new brown Chevy, but he was surprised to see Wes step out.

"What the hell's going on?"

"Cleaning up a little mess, that's all," Carson said, setting the calf on the ground.

"You better just fucking get the move on."

"I'll pay," Carson said, reaching for his wallet.

"They aren't for sale," Wes said.

Carson stood with his wallet in his hand. Then turned and walked slow and deliberate toward his truck, sliding his wallet back into his pocket.

"You ain't leaving Sellers," Wes yelled, jogging ten yards back to the brown Chevy. Carson knocked a knuckle along the side of his trailer, listening to the dull metallic thump echo back from the inside. He looked over his shoulder, watching the Wes' outline pull something long from behind the truck seat.

"Fuck me," Carson mumbled. He stepped up into his truck and turned the ignition.

Wes jogged toward him, rifle in hand, loading a shell in the chamber.

"Wes, I don't know you good enough to have you pull a gun on me."

“You know me well enough to know that I’ll fucking kill you. Now, open that trailer and let those cattle out.”

“I won’t Wes, and I know you won’t use that gun, not today.”

“I don’t know that,” Wes brought the rifle up and held it square against his shoulder.

Carson put the truck in drive, watching through the driver’s side mirror as the one charolais calf wandered along behind the trailer. Carson flinched with the first shot, gripping the steering wheel tightly, and again with the quick second shot. A double jolt seemingly popped through his body, speeding somewhere away from him. He looked down at himself, ran his hands over his chest, and touched his side closest to the truck door. Nothing. Then, he took a deep breath and put the truck in park. Out the window, the charolais calf jogged a few steps and then stopped, turning his head to look at the trailer, then at Wes, its nose dripping snot in the middle of the gravel road. Then, Carson watched Wes’ son run up behind his father.

“Get back in the truck,” Wes said, looking over his shoulder. “I said, get back in the truck.”

Carson took another deep breath and stepped out of his truck. The shots from the gun had opened up his veins and flushed the alcohol through. He stood looking at the trailer’s tire rims sitting on the flat rubber. He thought, briefly, that he might have to leave the trailer parked there. He reached in the back of his truck, lifting out the four by four block of wood. It was discolored, green and black rings where earth had ground itself into the grain. The wood felt wet and dense, with more mass than it seemed to have

at any other time and he could feel the block's wood-grain, creating a tight bind in the curve of his grip. Now that it was there, it felt like a weapon. He stared at Wes, the block dangling loosely from his right hand. Wes still shouldered the rifle, pointing it at Carson. Carson tapped the block along the side of his trailer. He squatted down, examining the two flat trailer tires. He ran his hand along the rims and then stood, turning to Wes.

"Two good tires you just shot up," he yelled.

"Not anymore," Wes said.

Carson walked around to the back of the trailer and lifted the lever from the catch, letting the door swing open, then came back around to the side and stood up on the fender well and reached in slapping the inside of the trailer wall with the four by four. The cows stepped down from the trailer, followed by the two calves. Carson waved them away and walked the trailer door shut. He felt a breeze pick up from the west and mist from the low hanging clouds chilled damp on his skin.

"I suggest you just leave," Wes said, lowering the rifle. "That'd be the best for both of us."

Carson nodded and walked to the trailer jack. He squatted in the gravel, pulling the four by four in a circle over the rock. There, the black white-faced calf stood next to the trailer, its head bobbing up and down. He took slow steps toward the calf, feeling the wood grain tighten into his grip. He raised the four by four swiftly above his head and swung it down in one hard motion on the back of the calf's head. The calf sunk to its front knees and fell sideways to the ground. Carson could tell by the sharpness of the crack that something snapped within the calf's neck or skull.

“Goddammit Sellers,” Wes yelled.

Carson walked calmly over to the charolais calf standing in the middle of the gravel road. The calf turned, eyeing Carson from the side, his eye wide and his muscles taut as if he were about to jump.

“Goddammit Sellers,” Wes yelled again. “Stop.”

Carson brought the four by four down once more, falling forward over the calf with the force. The calf wobbled two steps toward Wes and shook its head, then two more steps and stood with its legs wide, its nose bleeding onto the gravel. Carson stepped over to it and kicked it in the front shoulder. The calf toppled over, its chest still heaving. Carson held the four by four in both hands and brought it down twice more on the calf’s head. He looked down at it and then poked its stomach with the four by four. The calf didn’t move.

“That’s two,” he said. “We’re even.” He lifted the four by four up to his shoulder and let it rest up on the bridge of his neck. He stared at the barrel of Wes’s gun, closing his eyes and waiting for something vivid and colorful to burst in his head, something to release and loose his grip on the four by four. There was a flash over the back of his eyelids and he opened them. The Schmidt’s headlights shined brightly behind Wes as someone moved the truck forward. He stood for a moment longer, listening to the muffled report of thunder somewhere to the west. Then, he turned and walked back to his truck, tossed the four by four in the bed and opened his door, climbing in. He watched from his cab as a woman’s figure stepped out of the truck, walking up behind Wes, her outline dark in the headlights. He wondered, for a moment, if he might be dead and the

light behind Wes appeared, like the woman, from somewhere otherworldly. He squinted.

The woman stood next to Wes, her arms crossed in front of her. Carson turned the ignition and pulled onto the road, the Schmidt's headlights now shining off into a cornfield. The woman had longer and darker hair than Michelle, and she held her shoulders back. From here, he could see nothing in the woman's face that reminded him of Michelle. Carson pushed into the gas pedal and rolled up his window.

Jory Schmidt

Jory leaned forward, his forearms across his thighs, the dead calves in his periphery, headlights bouncing across the tops of switchgrass. He looked once to the tailgate, as the grass popped out from under the truck, the taillights coloring the grass red in the wake, the exhaust steaming through a light sprinkle. He watched the neon green from the dash illuminate the cab, his father and grandfather exchanging words; Wes looking toward Bill, saying something, Bill returning the glance, lips forming quick and forceful words that Jory couldn't read. They had rolled down the windows, elbows sticking out from the cab. He watched Xenia in the middle, her hair tangling in the wind through the cab, she reached up and pulled her hair to the side and held it.

Then, the tree line. The headlights moved up and down across it as they rode over a rough spot in the pasture. He leaned back and spread his arms out against the lip of the truck bed, wrapping his thumbs around the inside of the lip, holding tight as the truck bumped across the earth. Jory could tell it was muddy, the truck's tires slipped as they came to a stop.

Jory pulled the charolais calf from the tailgate and dragged him to the edge of the treeline, Wes followed behind Jory with the black white-faced calf.

“Dad,” Wes said, “you want to grab one end?”

“I can do it,” Jory said.

“Alright, then.” Wes said. At the edge of the ditch, Wes picked up the charolais calf’s back hooves and Jory bent, lifting the front hooves. Xenia and Bill were standing behind him, watching. Bill’s flashlight pointed at Jory’s feet.

“One,” Wes counted, and they swung the calf back, “two, three.” Wes twisted, but Jory dropped his front end and the calf’s head slammed into the the ground, knocking Jory backward, onto his butt.

“I’ll get it,” Bill said, pulling Jory up, handing him the flashlight.

Jory quickly wiped himself off and glanced at Xenia, but he couldn’t see her face. He turned his back to her and watched his dad and grandfather throw the white calf toward the ditch, its body catching flickers of headlight as it rose and then fell, rolling down the steep embankment to the bottom of the ditch. Then, again, they counted and this time Jory watched the black white-faced calf land, rolling slowly to the bottom of the ditch. He waved his flashlight beam across the ditch bottom. The black-white faced calf had rolled to the bottom and landed against a tree trunk, all four hooves pointing up.

“I figured this would have filled up,” Wes said.

“Didn’t get as much rain here, east,” Bill said. “Morrison said they got an inch of rain and ten foot of wind. Lots of rain to the south though, filling creeks up over the bridges.”

“Hold this Grandpa,” Jory said, placing the flashlight back in Bill’s hand. “Right there, on that calf.” Jory walked diagonally, talking small steps and keeping his legs bent.

“What the hell are you doing?” Wes asked.

“Fixing it,” Jory said.

“What?”

“The calf.”

“Goddammit Jory,” Wes yelled.

Halfway down, Jory slipped, sliding the rest of the way on his side. He picked himself up, his jeans wet and muddy, water running over his boots. He took exaggerated steps, lifting his boots from the water and then he pulled the calf around the stump and laid it flat, lifting its head out of the water and up on a large rock protruding from the side of the creek. Then, he started back up the slope, feeling for a hold, and pulling himself up. He could hear his father and grandfather talking, but could not make out their words. Halfway up, he slipped and had to start again. His legs were tired now, his arms heavy.

“You need some help?” Wes yelled. Jory didn’t answer. A few minutes later he stood, again, half-way up the slope, holding onto a small tree.

“Need some fucking help now?” Wes yelled.

“You didn’t have to shoot his tires,” Jory yelled, finally. “You didn’t have to. You could have just gone down and unhooked his trailer. Those calves would be alive right now if you wouldn’t have shot those tires.”

Jory stood for a few more seconds, and then kneeled to crawl up the muddy bank.

“Pull your fucking self up, goddammit,” Wes yelled. Jory looked up as his father tossed a log-chain toward him. He watched Wes wrap the top end around a tree. Jory crawled toward it.

Xenia stood beside Bill at the edge of the treeline. Bill gestured with the flashlight a straight line to where Jory needed to go to grab the end of the log-chain. She heard Wes slam the tailgate, then drop it and slam it again.

“Fuck,” Wes yelled. Xenia turned, listening as Wes talked to himself, his words hushing hard against his teeth. In the ditch, she watched Jory balance himself along the wet slope, stepping carefully toward the chain, cussing himself the same.

Carson Sellers

Gravel grated against the trailer's rims for a mile before Carson Sellers decided to pull over and unhook the trailer. He unlatched the trailer from the ball and turned the crank on the side of the trailer until the jack sat flat on the four by four. Then, he opened the back trailer gate and let it swing wide.

"Nice ride?" He stepped up and in, walking to the front of the trailer. He unlatched the front trailer compartment and reached down, picking the black calf up from the trailer bed. It raised its head while Carson stepped down and out of the trailer, but did not struggle against Carson's hold. Carson carried the calf to his truck and sat him down, keeping one arm around the calf's head while he opened the door.

"It's okay. It's okay. Just relax now." Carson loosened his hold around the calf's neck as he picked him up, setting him in the seat.

"Don't be shitting on my floorboard," Carson said, sliding up into his driver's side seat.

The calf couldn't stay balanced as Carson drove, falling when Carson came to a stop before he pulled onto CC and then scraping its hooves against the rubber floorboard, bawling, as it tried to stand again. Finally, the calf rested its head up on the seat, while its hooves and body spread out along the floorboard.

"That's right," Carson said. "Just relax already. We're almost home." Carson pulled up to his house and sat with the truck running, the headlights shining brightly against the wood siding. The house was a two-story farmhouse that his father Danny bought in 1973. It was yellow back then and had been half-painted one time since, when Danny was trying to keep his wife from leaving. So, the north side of the house was sided with boards that flaked yellow, while the rest of the house's siding was somewhere between gray and brown rot. A light turned on in the kitchen and Carson left the calf in his truck and walked to a detached shed built with wood and tin that he had stolen from Nemanya County High School's Ag Shop his senior year. He picked out two spare tires that looked like they might fit and carried them to his truck.

"What the hell? You got a calf in there. Where in the hell'd you get a calf?" Danny stood in cowboy boots and underwear next to Carson's truck. His underwear hung loose and wide around his the tops of his thighs and he scratched along his waistband. "Carson," he yelled.

"Found it," Carson said, tossing the two tires into the back of his truck.

"Found it. Don't fucking lie to me. Where's the trailer?"

"Two tires are flat," Carson said.

"You air them up before you left?"

“They were fine before I left, now they’re flat,” Carson said.

“You going to take that calf there with you?” Danny asked.

“Planned on it.”

“Just take him inside.”

“What are you going to do? Make him feel at home?”

“No need getting him all carsick. He’ll be shitting all over the truck.”

“Jesus,” Carson said.

“You got something to feed him?”

“Not right now.”

“Well he can’t be sucking on your dick,” Danny said. “What you going to feed him?”

Carson opened the passenger side door and picked the calf up off the floorboard. Danny followed at Carson’s hip, walking in-step with Carson, his boots shuffling in the wet grass.

“He looks like a Samson. Call him Samson. I just might call you Samson,” Danny said, tapping the calf on the head. Carson walked with the calf to the screen-door. Danny opened the door and Carson stepped up the two stairs and in, setting the calf on worn linoleum.

“What, you got a problem with Samson?”

“I don’t give two shits. Call him what you want,” Carson said.

The calf’s hooves clicked on the linoleum. It sniffed along a row of boots and shoes and dirty clothes. Danny slid off his boots and stood barefoot on the linoleum, the

bulb-light yellow on his skin, shadows outlining the bones in his chest and veins in his shoulders and arms. Carson watched his father reach down and pet the calf, then squat beside it, his arms seeming thinner than the calf's forelegs. The calf took small steps from the washroom to the kitchen. Carson watched the man bent over the calf, the threaded skin and tissue and bone no longer looked like his father—his skin was even bonewhite and mostly hairless—his forearms, the points of his hips. Carson watched his father slide his long fingers down, along the calf's black back, then up again toward the calf's face. The calf tilted its head and turned, sniffing at Danny's face.

“Yep, you're a Samson,” Danny said, turning to Carson. “We'll call him Samson.” Then, Danny turned back to the calf and Carson could feel him smiling.

Carson picked up his father's boots and sat them side by side next to the screen-door, then opened the door silently, shutting it behind him. He stood on the step, looking up at the sky, the lightning switching on a line of clouds, then switching them off again, brief and bright.

Xenia

Xenia watched Jory wipe his hands over his jeans slick with mud. Then, he bent down and wiped his hands in the long wet grass.

“You ain’t riding up there,” Wes said. He rolled the chain in a circle on the tailgate. “No sir, you ride back here.”

“Not going to hurt anything,” Bill said.

“If the little dumbass wants to throw a tantrum and get muddy, he can get the truckbed muddy. Not the cab. Not the seats. The truckbed. Where he can wash it out clean later. Or, he can walk. He can decide.”

“Wes,” Bill said.

“The cab’s dirty anyway,” Jory said, walking to the back of the truck. He climbed in, over the tailgate.

Bill whispered, “They’ve both got bullheads and tempers and shit for brains.”

Xenia nodded in the cab-light. “This happen often?”

“Once a day from what I can tell,” Bill said.

Wes slammed the tailgate and walked to the cab, stepping up and in, pulling the door shut behind him. “Take it slow,” Wes said. “Let him think about it for awhile.”

Bill drove up and out of the pasture, his tires sliding from time to time on the wet grass.

Neither Bill nor Wes spoke on the way home. Xenia caught Bill’s eyes in the rearview mirror more than once, but she could tell he was looking past her, over her shoulder. She turned once in her seat to see Jory holding on to the truckbed, the wind blowing a scalp line across the side of his head.

“He’s fine,” Wes said and Xenia thought he said it more to himself than to her, but still, the tone sounded familiar and slightly harsh. Wes cleared his throat and looked out the window.

The truck rolled heavily over the channels in the driveway and Xenia wondered if Jory still held to the side of the truckbed, but she didn’t turn to look. When Bill pulled to a stop, he let the truck engine run and Xenia stayed seated for a few seconds longer as Jory dropped the tailgate. Bill and Wes stood talking in front of the headlights. Xenia climbed out slowly, feeling the cab’s warmth leave in waves. A breeze chilled along her skin as she stepped behind Bill. Jory stood in front of the garage door, his arms at his sides, kicking off his boots.

“Strip before you go into the goddamn house,” Wes yelled.

Jory didn’t turn to acknowledge his father, but pulled his shirt over his head and then unzipped his pants and pulled them down over his legs. He stood in his underwear

and lifted one leg, hopping and pulling his sock from his foot, then the other sock. Xenia watched. She could sense the tenseness, the anger in the boy, the rapidity and jerkiness of his movements, and all at once she felt for him a pull of some feeling deep, an empathy. She had felt this kind of anger before. She wanted to say something to comfort the boy and at the same time, something to comfort Wes and even Bill, as if she had that magic within her. Jory picked up his clothes and slammed the door on the way inside.

“Take it easy on him,” Bill said, looking at Wes. Then, he turned to Xenia. “Feel free to call if these two bullheaded jackasses can’t play in the same pen. They know who the boss is. My number’s taped to the phone.” He reached out and brushed his hand against Xenia’s arm. She nodded. Bill turned and climbed back into his truck, honking twice as he pulled into the road.

Xenia stood in the driveway next to Wes, not sure where to step next, toward the house, toward the road. Overhead, a security light turned on, spreading an orange glow over the driveway. It was completely quiet. Wes stood with his arms crossed, head down. He sighed.

“Sometimes I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing,” he said.

Carson Sellers

Carson Sellers gathered gravel in a pile next to the trailer and propped his flashlight up on the pile, the beam focused up on the rims rusted bolts. He pulled hard on the tire-iron and his hands slipped, scraping three of his right hand knuckles hard along the side of the rim. He cursed and hit the trailer with the tire iron and then tossed the iron to the back of his truck. The knuckle throbbed and bled and he bit a flap of loose skin from his middle knuckle as he drove east along the gravel, spitting it onto his floorboard. He turned on his cab-light, glancing from the road to his knuckles, watching them bleed. Then, he wiped his knuckles on his jeans, on the seat cover, and licked the blood from them again.

A black Pontiac Grand Am with Iowa plates was car parked outside of Bernie's, dice hanging from the rearview mirror. Carson parked alongside it, checking the dash as he went inside. A teenage boy leaned over the pool table, getting ready to take a shot. Carson figured he was the car's owner. The boy paused when Carson walked by and Carson nodded, holding his hand steady to his side as to not draw attention to it. He slammed open the bathroom door and stood over the sink, dabbing his knuckles with the

brown paper until the bleeding slowed. Then, he tore thin strips of the brown paper and wrapped each knuckle, licking the end of the strip so the paper stuck to itself. The door opened behind Carson and Bernie walked in, sliding past Carson, placing one hand against the wall while he unzipped his pants.

“Punch something?”

“Want to,” Carson said.

“Nina’s not working tonight, if that’s why you’re here.”

“I know.”

“Need something then?”

“They won’t stop bleeding.”

“I got a kit, somewhere,” Bernie said, zipping his pants. He walked to the sink and reached past Carson, flipping on the faucet and running his hands briskly underneath and shook them toward the floor. “How many you need?”

“Three’d be nice,” Carson said, peeling back the paper. He could see the bonewhite of his knuckle before the blood seeped in around the edges and formed a bubble, trickling down the side of his knuckle again.

“Going to pay your tab while you’re here? Or am I supposed to take it out of Nina’s check?”

“I’ll pay her back. She knows I’m good for it.”

“Stay here. Don’t want you bleeding all over the bar.”

Carson nodded and watched through the mirror as Bernie shuffled through the doorway. Carson didn’t know why Michelle had ever enjoyed working for Bernie, but

she said she did. “He keeps people happy, makes them feel good when they come in,” she said one night as she handed him another shot. She had taken the job over three years ago and usually worked early morning hours, then came back around eight o’clock and worked till close at midnight. Carson explained to Michelle that these shifts Bernie had her working were giving Bernie time to sleep-in during the morning hours and go home earlier in the evening, because he’s fucking lazy, Carson had said, just screwing you over. But Michelle didn’t seem to mind, and after awhile Carson got used to her conversation, her smile, the way she teased him.

Carson knew Michelle from high school. She was three years older and they hadn’t talked then, but he had been a regular at Bernie’s after ten o’clock, after he put his father to bed. Carson liked to drink hard and fast. He took pride in drinking hard enough to be drunk within a half-hour, giving him another hour or two to sober up before closing time. Sometimes she stayed later than midnight, talking, smiling, as Carson sobered. Keeping him there until she thought he could drive safely home. Then, on an October night, he followed her into this very bathroom and she resisted, but he couldn’t stop. She tried pushing past him, but he blocked the door. As he grabbed for her, she punched him in the forehead, a ring cut a short thick line in his forehead and his own blood seemed to snap him out of whatever nightmare he was making for her. He apologized, right there, repeatedly, as he bled in front of her. He sat on the bathroom floor, crying. She held a paper towel to his head and he couldn’t stop as she dabbed the cut. He apologized more as she worked, and she said nothing until she was finished. Then, she said that she never had sex outside of her house, not in a truck on a dirt road, not in the middle of a pasture

under the night sky, not on the beach of Dine County Lake, not anywhere other than in her house. The kitchen, she said, that turns him on. Carson laughed, and then apologized, and she started laughing too. Then, she pulled her fingers through her hair and a rubber band from her pocket, snapping it, tying her hair back. She looked at herself in the mirror and he sat on the floor for another thirty minutes holding the paper towel to his head.

He stayed away from Bernie's for almost a month after that. When he finally came back in, she smiled and acted as if nothing had happened. And for that easy forgiveness, Carson thought he might have loved her even more.

Carson ran his knuckle under a drip of cold water, and then peeled back the bloody paper towel again. The bleeding had stopped, but his middle knuckle still throbbed. He opened the door and walked out and past the pool table where two teenagers were now racking the balls to play nine-ball, rows of quarters lining the side. At the bar, Bernie pulled a wad of gauze from a first-aid kit. Carson slid into a stool.

"Only got these two rinky-dink things," Bernie said, not looking up, but pushing two small bandages toward Carson.

"I'm fine," Carson said.

"I thought I had some bigger ones, you know, regular size, but we must have used them." He twisted the lid off of a small tube and then put it back on again, sliding it over the bar toward Carson.

"I'm fine," Carson repeated.

"Infections," Bernie said. "They'll be cutting off your middle finger. That can't be good for you. You get a lot of use out of that hand."

“Yeah,” Carson said. “I do.” He licked his knuckle again and twisted the lid off the antibiotic ointment. He squeezed a line on his fingertip and rubbed it over his knuckle, then pulled each tab of the bandage wrapper, then each white glossy tab from the bandage and pressed one end of the bandage hard against the side of his knuckle, pulling the other end over the top of the bloody divot.

“Don’t think I could have done that with one hand,” Bernie said. “Right there, that’s dexterity.”

“You can’t do a lot of things,” Carson said.

“I do the things I do,” Bernie said, picking the antibiotic ointment from the bar and closing up the first-aid kit. He walked back into the kitchen. Two teenagers were playing pool. The boy that was standing there earlier hit in the six and seven, but missed on the eight. Carson could never understand why anyone would play nine-ball if you had to pay for the game. Eight-ball always seemed to take longer. He walked over to the teenagers and the dark-haired boy knocked in the eight and nine.

“One of you two pay,” he said. “If you beat me, I’ll pay for all the games the rest of the night. Who’s up?” Both boys grinned.

“Me, I guess,” the dark-haired boy said, pulling a cigarette from his pack. “I won.”

Carson picked two quarters from the ones on the table and inserted them into the slots. “Nine ball?”

“Sure,” the boy said.

“You can break,” Carson said.

The boy knocked in the two ball on the break and followed with the one ball in the side pocket, missing on the three. Carson nodded, "Not bad," he said, and then knocked in the next five balls, leaving the eight and nine balls on the table. The boy knocked them both in.

"Damn it," Carson said, "Good shot."

"Thanks," the boy said. Carson pulled out his wallet and handed the boy a ten-dollar bill.

"You two want to help me out?" Carson asked. The two boys looked at each other, shrugging simultaneously. "Easy work," Carson said.

"Depends," said the dark haired kid.

The two boys sat silent next to Carson in his truck, each had a beer in hand and one between their legs. Their feet rested on an opened twelve pack on the floorboard. He told them to sit tight a minute. The kitchen lights were still on. The hall lights were still on. His father's bedroom lights were on and Danny was asleep in his underwear on top of his mattress. The calf curled neatly beside him.

"Jesus," Carson said. The room smelled of shit and Carson walked around the bed, there cowshit was smeared along the wooden floor. "Christ." Carson shook Danny awake. "The calf shit all over the fucking floor."

"I know," Danny said, rolling over to his side. "Turn off the light."

Carson turned off the light and walked to the phone, dialing Nina's number. It rang once.

“Where are you?” she asked. “I thought you were coming over.”

“I’m not going to make it.”

“Is it bad? Want me to come over?”

“No, just the regular. We’ll be fine.”

Outside the two boys leaned over the hood, the headlights outlining them, their shadows stretched long over the ground, wide and large on the shed’s peeling wall. Each held a beer in hand; one was waving his free hand exaggerating some unknown story. The other one laughed. Carson stood by the phone, watching.

Xenia

Clothes were piled in front of a sliding closet door, another pile at the base of Jory's bed. Michael Jordan posters took up one whole wall and California Raisin were figurines tipped and lying along the back of the dresser. Jory had showered again and his hair was slick and shining, parted and combed over. He looked very business-like she decided, even in a gray long sleeved shirt and black sweatpants. She could picture him as an accountant, or lawyer, or any of the types that looked the same as they asked for directions to the meeting rooms of the Marriott. He stood on his bed with a ceramic stein in hand. There was an Indian warrior with a plume-filled headdress painted on the stein. It looked as if Jory had tried painting it himself and then someone else had tried fixing it.

“A pistol handle,” he said, pulling a rusty object from the stein. “From the civil war.”

“Very impressive,” she said. “Where did you find it?”

“At the bottom of the pasture.”

Xenia nodded, listening as his words came slow and soft and without him looking at her.

“Me and mom were picking up rocks to put around the flowers out front and I found it. She told Dad she found it and he said he’d give her two dollars for it, but I found it, so I took the two dollars and bought this,” he said, holding up the stein.

“Did you paint it too?” she asked.

“Kind of,” he said.

Xenia didn’t know what it was like to lose a mother. Her mother was hard working and Xenia knew it, but for a long time, never cared to consider it. During the day, her mother worked as a telemarketer for a credit card company, at night she held a shift at an Amoco station, and on Sundays she spent as much of the day as she could at Saint Paul Cathedral. Her mother had carried two jobs for as long as Xenia could remember. When her mother was in the house she was overbearing, judgmental, disapproving of her friends, her boyfriends, clothing, tattoos, piercings, her Art major, all were unacceptable. As a child, Xenia would sit through her mother’s lectures, knowing they would end eventually, even if it meant falling asleep at the kitchen table. At some point, she learned like most that she could ignore them completely, even when her mother was yelling. Then, Xenia dropped out of Allegheny during her second year and took a full-time job as a desk clerk at the downtown Pittsburgh Marriott. Two weeks later her mother wanted to know why she was getting up so early, so Xenia told her. Her mother said nothing, walking silently out of her room in pajamas. Then, Xenia could hear her talking to herself in the kitchen. In the morning, her mother was asleep at the table with a

note on the back of an envelope written with a green pen, one that Xenia noticed her mother had drawn a number of circles with so the ink would flow. The note said, *You don't learn even for free and I don't care anymore*. She tore it up and left it there.

Four months later, Xenia had saved enough to move into an apartment. Almost a year later, she called in sick for three days and then went to a doctor. That night, she waited on her mother's doorstep until two. Xenia calmly told her mother about the baby and her mother lectured her in the kitchen about how right she had been. Xenia sat up straight in her chair, like she did when she was working behind the Mariott's desk. Then her mother left the room. Minutes later she came back screaming, shattering three picture frames on the linoleum floor. Finally, her mother sat on the broken glass and Xenia moved to her, kneeling slowly, and they both cried. There, on the floor her mother told her to keep it, please, please for God's sake keep it. So she did.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Xenia asked.

Jory nodded and walked to his dresser. He opened it and pulled out a plain black frame. He held it up for her. The woman was blonde with high cheekbones and long blonde hair. She held a slight smile on her lips as if the photographer had snapped the picture a second too early.

"She's very pretty," Xenia said.

"Yeah," Jory said, slipping the frame back into his drawer. He walked back over to his pistol handle and sat on his bed, holding it. "Grandpa said a battle was fought here, do you think so?"

"I don't know, maybe," she said. "Your grandpa seems like a smart man."

“I think so,” Jory said, putting the pistol handle back in the cup. He reached up and slid the cup onto a shelf above his bed, then jumped down from the bed and walked to his dresser, setting up the California Raisins in a semi-circle around a stack of cards. “I used to rearrange these and mom would think my room was clean.”

“It looks clean to me.” Xenia said, smiling.

“Pretty much,” he said.

“Jory,” Wes said softly, “stop stalling. Hurry up and get this cleaned. Strip the bed. I’ll make it up. Get the move on.”

“I can sleep somewhere else,” Xenia said. “It’s really not that big of deal.”

“No,” Jory said. “You can sleep in my bed. It’s where Grandpa sleeps when he stays over. He likes it.”

“We’ll be back in a few minutes,” Wes said. “It better be clean.”

Xenia turned and followed Wes to the kitchen.

“You hungry or anything?” he asked.

“Water?”

Wes pulled a styrofoam cup from a plastic sack on the bar and filled it.

“Well-water,” Wes said. “Might taste a little funny if you’re not used to it.”

Xenia took a drink. The water was cold and had a metallic aftertaste. She smiled and nodded. “Thanks,” she said.

“Sellers used to give my wife problems,” Wes said, sitting. “I still see him drive by the house sometimes.”

“Is that the guy, today?”

Wes nodded. "He used to keep her late when she worked in town. Once I went up there and walked in a little after midnight and he was still at the bar. He was surprised to see me, that's for sure."

"I bet," she said.

"I have no idea what makes a guy act like that," Wes said. He leaned back and pulled off his cap, pushing his hair back.

"You could call the cops," she said.

"I had to pull my finger from a trigger. Doesn't help my case."

Xenia took another drink and dug her thumbnail into the styrofoam. She had never seen anyone point a gun on another person. Even when Wes was loading the rifle, she didn't know what was going on and she had considered running right then. Her neighborhood had always had a few dangerous men. They were confident and arrogant, she thought. Yet, Carson looked timid, even nervous, his motions quick and jerky. Then, when the club came down, that forward lean of his body and how the weight pulled him over, he looked like a man that didn't care that he was out of control.

"Well, he is dangerous," she said.

Wes stood to the fridge and held up a beer. "Want one?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. He brought three beers to the table and pushed one toward her.

"I let Jory have a beer every-once-in-awhile. Gets him to sleep. A twelve year old. He should have at least four more years before he drinks, don't you think?"

"I drank when I was twelve," she said. "It could be worse. Twelve year olds can do a lot worse."

“Last week we both passed out in the truckbed. We were fishing and I was drinking whiskey and I let him have a little too much. Dad found us at about two in the afternoon.” Wes paused and took a drink. “He was pissed, if you can imagine that. I don’t know if I’d ever seen him so mad.”

Xenia dug an X into the styrofoam and then an E. She looked at him and he held her gaze for a minute and then looked down, tapping his thumb against the can. Then, he looked up again.

“What?” she asked.

“I don’t know a thing about you.” He slid his elbows onto the table and leaned in, crossing his arms.

“Ask,” she said, taking another drink.

“Where are you from?”

“Pennsylvania.”

“Never been there.”

“My turn,” she said.

Wes laughed. “It doesn’t work that way. You already know more about me than most.”

“Okay, what about Jory?” she asked. “His name.”

“Gerald William. We tried calling him Jerry, but he couldn’t say it, so it became Jory. Kind of a joke between me and Michelle. Then it stuck. Gerald was her grandpa’s name.”

“Rhiannon,” she said, raising her beer.

Wes nodded and raised his beer. “The song?”

“After the song, yes. My daughter,” she nodded. “My mother named her. I guess we used to sing that song together a lot. I don’t remember, but she does.”

“How old?”

“Three months.” The light in the ceiling fan flickered and the air conditioner kicked on. They sat in silence, listening to the hum.

“I bet she’s beautiful,” Wes said, finally. He opened his second beer. She watched him stare at it and she could tell he was thinking again. Unlike most men she knew, he was comfortable with her in silence. Yet, he was not what she imagined people around here would be like. His hair held a permanent crease where his cap usually sat, and as he rubbed his thumb gently along the silver rim, she noticed a black grit underneath his thumbnail, and dark stained creases along his thumb. He’s tattooed, she thought, smiling.

Wes looked up. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said. “You just looked like you were doing math in your head.”

“Well, I’m not the best at math, but I can build and fix things pretty well,” Wes said. “About anything, really.”

They drank in silence for some time. She finished her first beer since she had found out she was pregnant. She could tell Wes was thinking something, his eyes twitched as he followed his thumb around the rim of the can. After a time, he sat back in his chair and looked at her.

“What are you doing here?”

She sat quiet and felt her body tense at his tone. It sounded aggressive almost, as if he expected her to tell him some truth that she didn't know. Here, she thought. Across from her sat a man. She wore his son's clothes and had gotten them from a step that had been opened while she was probably half-naked. Here, the word stayed with her, the tone of it sharp.

She had started toward Chicago three days ago now with her mother's car and a suitcase full of her own clothes. When she stopped at a gas station in Indianapolis, she changed into one of her new dresses, the one that was still hanging on a hook by the kitchen door, still damp she imagined. At the gas station, she sat in the parking lot until three different cars had filled up their tanks beside her.

Rhiannon's father, Kenneth, was in Chicago and she had searched for his last name through the Marriott's customer history files. The weekend after she had spent a night in his room, he called twice while she was working the front desk. Their first conversation was awkward and she had put him on hold three times. Then, he asked that she call him back when she had a break. When she didn't, he called again minutes before her shift was over, and the second conversation was even shorter. His calls seemed naïve, and she could hear the nervousness in his voice. She never called him back. Later, when she had to search according to room number, trying to remember exactly what floor he was on, she wished she had asked his last name, or kept his business card.

From Indianapolis, she should have headed north on I-65 toward Chicago, but instead she drove west on I-74 to Champaign. There, she passed signs to Chicago and continued west along two-lane highways and blacktops, following signs toward towns

with names that sounded interesting, as if they were another language: Mahomet, Delavan, Ipava, Adair, Keokuk, Kahoka, Arbela, Corydon. She wrote them down on the back of her gas receipt and pictured them in a native alphabet, something she could draw on her skin, or with the watercolors that her mother had given her before Rhiannon was born. A cheap set, from the dollar aisle, but the first of many gestures that had led Xenia to this, finally deciding that her mother was right, that Kenneth James McHale should know he has a daughter, and he should find out in person, not over the phone like Xenia had originally planned.

So, she had driven with the windows cracked while it rained, smelling the brown plowed fields between hills of clumped cattle. There were houses, some well kept, some windowless and sagging, some with tractors sitting next to them. She watched her car run out of gas and finally stopped feeling nervous. For the first time in months, she relaxed altogether. Sitting there at the side of the road, she turned up the radio as a man with a low voice rattled off something about corn and soybeans in another language she didn't understand and she had smiled looking at the back of her receipt. Then, she got out and started walking. Then, here.

"I guess the easy answer is I decided to follow my mother's advice," she said. She told him about her mother, her job, Kenneth, he sat patiently listening. Afterward she thought he looked at her differently, as if no longer imagining. For a moment, she wished she could take it all back.

Carson Sellers

Carson turned in his seat, his arm along the back of the seat behind the dark haired boy's neck as he backed his truck up to the front of the barn.

"This your place?" asked the boy, lifting his beer to keep from spilling it as the truck bounced over a rut.

"Yeah." Carson turned off his headlights and pulled his flashlight from under the seat. "Sit tight."

The barn door hung loose and Carson could pull it far enough away from the barn to squeeze between the door and the frame. Inside, Carson flicked his flashlight from left to right: hay bales stacked along the left side of the barn, up in the loft, a line of bridles hung along the wall, saddles sat on sawhorses below them, a flatbed trailer sat with bales of hay still stacked on it, the yellow of a cat's eyes darted below the trailer. Last time he was here, kittens came to meet him and he took one home, a black kitten with a white spot on its forehead. He sat it gently in his shed with a bowl of milk. The kitten shook

and Carson had guided its nose into the bowl. A few months later, he found it dead along the road, run over by a passing car.

“Here kitty, kitty,” Carson called. He flashed his light under the trailer, but the cat had disappeared and no smaller eyes reflected back. Carson turned and unhooked the catch and slid the door open

“Why didn’t you just use that door?” The dark-haired boy stood leaning against the tailgate of Carson’s truck, pointing at the door with a combination lock hanging around a bolt catch. Carson studied the dark-haired boy, the flashlight beam shining into the boy’s face. The boy turned his face, bringing his elbow up to shadow the light.

“Forgot my keys,” Carson said.

Carson looked past the boy at the truck’s headlight beams shining up through the pasture. He jogged to the truck and turned them off again.

“I turned them on so Taylor could see where we were.”

“I told your friend to stay there,” Carson said. “He probably follows directions.”

“I follow directions fine.”

“What?” Carson aimed his flashlight aimed at the boy’s face again.

“I said—”

“Shut the fuck up. I heard what you said.” Carson pushed his seat forward and pulled two hay-hooks and a pair of leather gloves from behind the seat.

The boy finished his beer and flicked it into the barn.

“Pick that up,” Carson said.

The boy stood, staring into the flashlight, no longer turning his head. "You said this was your barn."

"It is."

"So why does it matter?"

"I keep shit clean. Fucking pick it up," Carson pulled his leather glove slowly over his right hand and walked into the barn. He climbed the ladder up into the loft and started throwing bales from the very back down to the ground. The hay hooks were old and solid rusty, the iron handles worn smooth, his great-grandfather's, made by a blacksmith in coals and flame at a time when hay hooks and blacksmiths were needed. Below, the hay dust flickered in the flashlight beam. The boy lifted each bale by the loose twine and carried it to the back of the truck, sliding it forward.

"How many?" Carson asked.

The boy coughed and Carson pointed the flashlight beam to the back of the truck. The boy stood at the end of the tailgate, his finger bobbing in rhythm with his whispering.

"Twenty-one, twenty-two," the boy said. "Twenty-two total."

"Eight more'd be good," Carson said, sitting his flashlight back on the loft floor. He tossed six more bales over the edge of the loft and climbed down, picking two bales from the floor of the barn and walking, one in each hand, to the truck. "Jesus," Carson said, dropping the two bales. "Never seen a stack of shit like this."

"What?" asked the boy.

"Nothing," Carson said. He climbed into the truck bed and tossed off the top row of bales, then pushed around the bottom two rows until they were snug against each

other. Then, the boy tossed up the other bales and Carson stacked the top row, shoving bales tight against each other. The boy stood beside the barn watching Carson push his knee into the bales, listening to him grunt.

“They were fine,” the boy said. Carson jumped down from the truck.

“That stack of shit wouldn’t have made it out of the fucking pasture.” Carson walked around the truck and slipped off his gloves, his hands cooling in the night. He rubbed sweat from his forearms and felt the hay dust deep in his lungs. He coughed, spit, and coughed again. He pulled his seat forward tossing the hay hooks and leather gloves behind the seat; then, climbed through the cab to the passenger side, pulling a tarp and rubber tarp straps from behind the seat.

Carson tossed one end of the tarp over the hay bales, hooking the tarp into the top edge of his truckbed and glanced into the barn.

“Put that out, dumbshit,” Carson said, dropping the tarp straps to the ground.

“What?” The boy stood, holding a cigarette. Carson walked up to him and slapped his hand, knocking the cigarette to the ground.

“This is a barn. That’s hay,” Carson said. “That’s hay dust, and that’s more hay.” Carson picked up the cigarette and stomped where it had left red embers smoking on the barn floor. He spit on it, and then held the cigarette cupped in his hand and walked to the cab, dropping the cigarette into a beer can.

“Sorry,” said the boy. “I wasn’t—”

“Shut up,” Carson said. “Forget it. I don’t give a shit.”

The boy bent and picked up the tarp straps, hooking the tarp into the top of the truck bed. Carson followed behind, tucking the tarp into the side of the truck, snug against the hay, watching the boy hook in the left side, then the right side.

“That good?” the boy asked.

“Fine job.” Carson coughed and spit again. He slid the barn door from the inside and hooked the catch, sliding the long bent nail into the eye-bolt.

Carson drove up out of the pasture, the hay scratching along his back window. His clock read 2:11 in neon green numbers. The boy pulled another beer from the pack on the floorboard.

“Thanks,” the boy said. “For the beer.”

“No problem,” Carson said. Taylor sat on the top of the gate and opened it as Carson drove through, closing it behind the truck.

“One truck drove by. I hid in the ditch like you said.”

Carson nodded.

The road in front of Bernie’s was empty and Carson dropped the boys off at their car. He pulled a twenty from his wallet and tossed it across the seat at the dark-haired boy as he stepped out.

“Have to share it kid,” Carson said.

“My name is Randy,” the boy said.

“J.P.” Carson said. “You two Davy Bennett’s grandsons? From Des Moines?”

The boys looked at each other, confused, and then shook their heads no simultaneously.

“Just wondering,” Carson said.

“You going to need help anymore?” asked Randy.

“Might,” Carson said.

“We could always use the beer,” Randy said. Behind him, Taylor nodded and held up the half-empty case. Randy stood with the door open as if he had more to say. Carson coughed and spit out his open window.

Carson unloaded half of the hay bales into his shed, stacking them between a pile of metal fence-posts and a barrel of tools: shovels, post-hole diggers, long stamping rods, and lengths of two-by-four scraps. The other half he stacked behind the shed and covered them with the tarp.

Inside, he went to his father’s room and carried the calf to the shed. It didn’t move in his arms, and it stood when he sat it down gently on the shed floor. He pulled the twine from a bale and scattered the hay around the shed floor, kicking it in a circle so it covered the wooden floor evenly. He loosed a second bale in a pile and spread it out with his hands. He walked the calf to the pile and pushed the calf’s back end down into the hay and the calf sat and kneeled down into the pile. Carson sat too, petting the calf. He pushed the calf’s head into the hay, but the calf resisted, pushing up against Carson’s hand.

“Too early for that, huh?” Carson asked. The calf raised its head and stood back up, stepping toward Carson. “You hungry?”

Carson shut the shed door behind him and walked to the house. He opened the refrigerator and pulled a half-gallon of whole milk from the refrigerator door. He poured the milk into a big bowl and warmed it in the microwave.

“What’d you do with him? Where’d Samson go?” Danny asked, turning on the kitchen lights. “What’d you do with him?”

“He’s in the shed,” said Carson.

“He was fine in here.”

“He shit all over your room.”

“I’ll clean it up.”

“He’s not staying in here.”

“It’s not your house.” Danny shoved a finger into the middle of Carson’s back.

Carson turned, and pushed Danny’s arm away. “Cut it. He’s not staying in here.”

Danny turned, walking slowly back toward his room, pounding his fist in a slow cadence along the wall.

Carson pulled the bowl from the microwave and walked back to the shed, setting the bowl in front of the calf. The calf sniffed it and Carson pushed the calf’s nose down into the bowl, but the calf wouldn’t take.

“It’s easy,” Carson said, pushing the calf’s nose into it again. The calf jerked its head up and snorted milk from its nostrils. “Damn it.” Carson stood and held the calf between his legs, pushing the calf’s head down toward the bowl. The calf fell to its knees and the bowl tipped, spilling milk along the shed floor. “Shit,” Carson said.

“Won’t drink that,” Danny said, leaning against the doorway. “Needs formula and a bottle and we don’t have either one.”

Carson stood, wiping his hands along his jeans and his shirt. The calf turned and walked to the hay, sniffing it.

“I was going to Orscheln’s in the morning, just thought he might be hungry now.”

“He is,” Danny said. “But he ain’t having none of that. Needs a bottle, that’s all.” Danny plugged in the small black radio. He felt for the dial, pulling the dial down until a country beat came through the speakers. “Samson likes country music,” Danny said, flipping off the shed light.

Wes Schmidt

It had been months since Wes had slept a whole night through. It began with Jory coming to his room and sleeping at the foot of his bed. Tonight, Wes carried him to Michelle's side of the bed, covering him. He stood in the hallway and said an awkward good night to Xenia, standing there until she shut Jory's door. Then, he pulled another beer from the refrigerator and sat in a lawn chair at the edge of his garage.

The lights from Waltersville flickered above the line of trees at the south end of his pasture. They looked closer than twenty miles, blinking through the damp like a slogging memory in Morse code. There, in Waltersville, people had houses close together and an orange-yellow light swelled from the middle of the town, tall towers outside the city blinked bright red disclets of color through the black night. He wondered if the Waltersville lights were like where Xenia was from, somewhere in Virginia, or Ohio, or wherever she said—he had already forgotten. That detail he had missed. He wondered if she had grown used to the sound of cars driving by her house all through the night, if she turned on a fan to drown out the sound, if it might be too quiet inside Jory's room, if the

air-conditioner startled her when it kicked on, if she usually locked the door at night. Wes imagined she did. He imagined most people did. Wes had only locked the door a couple of times. Twice in the last month he had been sitting at Bernie's and a group of men were talking about things disappearing from their barns, not enough to be suspicious, but little things kept coming up missing. Small stuff, they said, stuff that had a specific place, a few things here and there that they thought they had just misplaced, but never found. Damned thieving, one of them had said, always someone taking what they think belongs to them, That night, Wes had locked the door. But, he hadn't in quite awhile.

At the edge of the fence-line Missy, Michelle's mare, leaned over, pulling grass from the lawn-side of the fence. Wes stood and walked toward her, the rain cool on his skin, his bare feet sinking into the wet grass, into the earth below. He stood at the fence and pulled grass from the ground, letting Missy lip it from his hand. The grass was wet, slick. He slid his hand along the horse's wet neck and rubbed her ears. She shook her head and turned away, pulling more grass from the ground. Wes heard a car coming from the east. He turned, watching the headlights drive past. Then, walked back to the garage and opened the kitchen door. The clock read 3:34. He sat again. It would be at least two days before they could get into the fields to replant seed, if it didn't rain. If it did, it might be a week, or more. The radio had called for an eighty percent chance in the morning. He imagined the radio was right. His shorts wet from sitting, his shirt now wet, again. Wes didn't mind the wet. He had always liked watching the rain. Even when he was young he would sit and watch storms for hours. Tonight, while he sat, he imagined himself as a being of rain, a river washing down the driveway. He would spill over the concrete slab

at the end of the driveway and into a ditch along the asphalt road, picking up speed as he flowed downhill pooling in a culvert, and then traveling south into a nameless creek. Somewhere, he didn't know where, probably on Harold Newstead's bottom ground, he and the creek would eventually join the Nemanya. And there he would pass just for a time through the water where his wife had died.

"Dad," Jory said.

"What?"

"I want to sleep in your bed."

"You were in my bed," Wes said.

"Oh."

"Get a drink. Go back to bed."

"Okay," Jory said.

Wes followed Jory through the door and poured a cup of water. Jory drank it and handed Wes the empty white cup.

"Go," Wes said.

"Are you?"

"I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay."

Wes heard Jory walk hard on his heels over the kitchen floor.

Inside, Wes stripped his shorts and his shirt and tossed them into a pile at the top of the stairs with towels and Jory's muddy clothes. He thought about showering, but it was late and the noise might wake her. She had showered after Jory came to the kitchen

announcing that his room was clean, after her story was finished and Wes had nothing to say. For the first time all night, he felt awkward, now knowing. Wes picked up her towel and smelled it. It was still damp and smelled like bar soap and his shampoo. If he hadn't known it was her towel, he might have thought it was his own. They had thrown away Michelle's fragrant shampoos and her lavender body washes. He buried his face in Xenia's towel and breathed deep. He could not remember Michelle's smell. He dried his hair and shoulders with the towel and then tossed it back to the clothes pile. He pulled a black washrag from a kitchen drawer, placing the washrag over the blinking VCR lights in the living room. He settled into the couch, his head propped up on the armrest, covering himself with an afghan. The ceiling fan clicked and hummed, the washrag slipped from the VCR to the floor, and Wes could not sleep.

Vita

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